

French Secular Thought: Foucault and Political Spirituality

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Introduction

In this article I note that “religion” was either largely absent from 20th century French social theory or appeared as a puzzle that would be resolved by history. Religion was a remnant of traditional culture that been challenged both by the Enlightenment and the French Revolution. Marxist sociology, that was inspired by Louis Althusser, treated religion as merely an ideology that spread resignation or confusion among subordinate groups. The tradition of secular Marxist research on Islam in France is illustrated by the work of Maxine Rodinson. I focus on Rodinson as the most prominent secular scholar of Islam and the Middle East of his generation in order to make the contrast with Michel Foucault’s attempt to avoid looking at Shi’ism through the lens of Western secularity. Rodinson, who was highly critical of Foucault as simply “naive”, is credited with inventing the

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idea of “Islamofascism” to describe the Shia revolt as resulting in an Islamic theocracy. *Laïcité* ran deep in political life, in civil society and in the academy.

The Shia Revolution therefore presented a specific puzzle or anomaly – could archaic forms of religion actually act as a progressive force in removing a modernizing but authoritarian monarchy? I applaud Foucault’s attention to religion and find his account of the revolution unhindered by any privilege allocated to Western views of Shia religiosity. The difficulty with Foucault’s analysis of the revolution is that it was inconsistent with his theory of power as the ensemble of micro disciplines. How can we reconcile the notion of governmentality with the eruption of a mass movement against the Shah?

Foucault’s understanding of the revolution in terms of “political spirituality” was unsurprisingly ridiculed and he was further criticized for not retracting his understanding of Shia radicalism when the revolution assumed a post-revolutionary authoritarianism. However the post-revolutionary situation in Iran raises a deeper question about the nature of revolution itself. Were the two revolutions of Iran in the twentieth century – the Constitutional Revolution (1906-11) and the Shia Revolution (1978-9) to overthrow the Pahlavi Shah - both historical failures? Foucault’s sociology of the Islamic revolution raises a troublesome and enduring question about the negative unintended consequences of all forms of resistance and revolt.

History and Context: Post-War French Social Theory

To understand Michel Foucault’s intervention in the Shia Revolution and more importantly the response to his publications, we have to take into account the history of French secularism. In this context I prefer to speak about “The Shia Revolution” following Vali Nasr’s *The Shia Revival*¹ and not “The Iranian Revolution” to bring into the foreground its religious nature. By contrast with the United States

¹Vali Nasr, *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts Within Islam Shape the Future* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006).

and the United Kingdom, French culture in general and its elite intellectual culture in particular are profoundly and explicitly secular. While both France and the United States share a revolutionary origin, the United States has a secular constitution, but religion plays a large part in its politics and civil society. One basic aspect of American exceptionalism has been the overt role of religion in public life. To a large extent, France has remained much closer to the Enlightenment legacy of rationalism and secularism. For example, being engaged with the legacy of the Enlightenment has been one foundation of the anti-Catholic attitude of urban France. *Laïcité*, the French version of secularism, is the dominant feature of public life. This secularity was reinforced as a consequence of the devastation of two World Wars and German occupation.

After World War II, two secular traditions - existentialism and neo-Marxism - largely dominated the humanities and social science. Two key figures were Jean-Paul Sartre and Louis Althusser. In sociology, Althusser attempted to reformulate Marxist economic determinism by arguing that politics and ideology are conditions of existence of the economic.² He also reconstructed the Marxist theory of ideology by developing the idea that ideological relations are real and not simply reflections of the economy, but this insight was not applied to religion. The reproduction of capitalism in the modern world rests on what he called the “ideological state apparatus.” Althusser and Etienne Balibar³ had considerable influence outside France; their ideas were explored energetically by a generation of British sociologists.⁴ The other influential figure in this Marxist revival was Nicos Poulantzas.⁵ These ideas were not ingested without criticism. One other major figure in post-war French intellectual culture was Raymond Aron who was, as a disciple of Max Weber,

²Louis Althusser, *For Marx* (London: Allen The Penguin Press, 1969).

³Louis Althusser and Etienne Balibar, *Reading Capital* (London: New Left Books, 1970).

⁴Nicholas Abercrombie, Stephen Hill and Bryan S. Turner, *The Dominant Ideology Thesis* (London: Allen Lane, 1980).

⁵Nicos Poulantzas, *Political Power and Social Classes* (London: New Left Books, 1970).

critical of Marxist sociology. Despite ideological divergences in this post-war generation of intellectuals, the one thing they had in common was a total lack of interest in religion.⁶ Prior to the political crisis in Iran, Foucault had also given little attention to religion, being mainly focused on madness, psychiatry, penitentiaries, sexuality and the origins of the human sciences. The revolution put radical Shi'ism on the foreign-relations agenda of the West and focused academic attention on the nature of the uprising.

Perhaps the oddity of post-war Marxism was that it also involved a revival of the legacy of Antonio Gramsci, but it did not include any significant acknowledgement of his recognition of the importance of religion in general and of the Roman Catholic Church in particular. Gramsci recognized the moral and cultural hold of the Church over society and that any successful political party of the working class would have to displace that moral control with its own educational and ethical systems.⁷ At the popular level, Catholicism had a powerful hold over the masses.

Marxist sociology never developed much beyond Marx's famous metaphor of "the opium of the people." However if religion is far more than a collection of false beliefs that function as a narcotic, how can we understand its material force from a sociological perspective? Secular sociology tends to concentrate research on beliefs and attitudes because such data lends itself to easy quantification. Research on religious practices typically requires an ethnographic approach that does not readily produce large sets of quantitative data. In order to conceptualise the materiality of religion, I list five components. First, contemporary sociology of religion has returned to the idea of the axial age religions (800-200 BCE) which are said to have opened up "the age of criticism" by contrasting the unsatisfactory nature of our existence on earth with a future world to come.⁸

⁶Raymond Aron, *The Opium of the Intellectuals* (London: Seeker & Warburg, 1957).

⁷Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (London: New Left Books, 1971).

⁸Arnold Momigliano, *Alien Wisdom: The Limits of Hellenization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975).

The result was the creation of powerful narratives of suffering and justice involving possibilities of resistance and retribution. The camel cannot pass through the eye of a needle and the rich man cannot enter into paradise. Secondly, religions typically involve powerful symbols, signs and spaces that concentrate and condense these abstract narratives into collective memories and emotions that become conduits of the faith. Thirdly, there is an ensemble of daily practices such as diet, prayer and more formal rituals around birth and death that give concrete expression to the narratives, symbols and sacred objects. Fourthly, following Émile Durkheim, these beliefs and practices relative to sacred objects create a community of believers who can act in concert. Fifthly, religions typically operate in and through holy cities – one thinks of Mecca, Rome, Qom, Ankor Wat, and Jerusalem. These holy cities are the sites of pilgrimage, collective rituals, healing, and miracles. What secular cities have commanded such adoration over the centuries? Can Birmingham compete in the world of collective memory alongside Canterbury? Shi'ism with its narratives of suffering and martyrdom, its holy cities and global community, its moral codes and theology was a material force able to overthrow a rich and powerful state. Neither Marxism nor secular sociology have adequately grasped this “materiality” of the religious – its holy places, its cosmopolitan communities, its sacred figures, its histories of oppression and resistance, its emotions of resentment and revenge, and its narratives of justice and sacrifice. Given the force of religious movements, the modern state has sought to mobilize religious forces to bolster its own power. The religious and the political are almost inevitably intertwined and intertangled.⁹

Perhaps unsurprisingly French sociology did not produce any major figure in the sociology of religion in the twentieth century, because, I would argue, the civil religion of French society was deeply secular. The same is true for contemporary scholarship. While Pierre Bourdieu has made lasting contributions to sociology, his writing on

⁹Bryan S. Turner, *The Religious and the Political* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013a).

religion is slight and conventional.¹⁰ Luc Boltanski is equally influential for his work on capitalism, indignation, and justice, but he has not in any systematic way contributed to the study of religion.¹¹ The French case has been precisely described by José Casanova who argues that France has a secular etatist ideology or *laïcité* that has the function of a civil religion in direct competition with an ecclesiastical religion.¹² France's civil religion demands the strict privatization of all religious belief and practice. Insofar as sociologists paid any attention to religion, they were primarily engaged with approaches that treated secularization as a necessary feature of modernity. In fact the sociology of Islam did not begin to acquire significant attention in Western sociology until after 9/11.¹³ With the growth of anti-Muslim sentiment, the sociology of Islam came to be dominated by an interest in Islamophobia, but this dominant focus has distorted research by cutting off other more fruitful channels of inquiry.¹⁴

While secular social science has been neglecting religion as a topic of serious research, religion in the world of global politics was very prominent in the 1960s. It was in *Public Religions in the Modern World* that Casanova identified major social movements in which religion played a critical role. He saw the revolution in Iran as a key example of the importance of “public religions” alongside liberation theology in Latin America, the Solidarity movement in Poland, and the rise of the Moral Majority in the United States.¹⁵ In fact we might reasonably add that if anything Casanova underestimated the impact of the religious revolution in Iran. After 1978-9 tensions between

¹⁰Terry Rey, *Bourdieu on Religion: Imposing Faith and Legitimacy* (London: Routledge, 2007).

¹¹Simon Susan and Bryan S. Turner, eds. *The Spirit of Luc Boltanski: Essays on the 'Pragmatic' Sociology of Critique* (London: Anthem Press, 2014).

¹²Jose Casanova, “Public Religions Revisited,” in *Religion: Beyond the Concept*, ed. Hent de Vries (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 101-119.

¹³Tugrul Keskin, ed., *The Sociology of Islam: Secularism, Economy and Politics* (Reading: Ithaca Press, 2011).

¹⁴Bryan S. Turner, “Sociology of Islam: The Desiderata,” *Sociology of Islam* 1 (2013b): 107-109.

¹⁵Jose Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

Shi'ism and Sunni Islam were manifest in the growing rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia that have been played out in Iraq and Syria, and more recently in Yemen, Qatar and Lebanon.

A critical turning point in the Church's relationship to the world was Vatican II in which the Catholic hierarchy accepted the idea of political modernization. More recently Casanova notes that, "By my hermeneutic Catholic perspective I mean the fact that my theory of 'modern public religion' was very much informed by the experience of the official Catholic *aggiornamento* of the 1960s."¹⁶ He challenged the traditional notion of secularization as the slow but inevitable erosion of religion as measured within a positivist epistemology as the decline in church attendance, belief in God, frequency of prayer, recruitment to the ministry and priesthood, and so forth. Casanova's publication drew attention to the obvious fact that around the world religion appeared, not to be simply a matter of private belief and practice, but a vital part of public life. The *aggiornamento* allowed the Church to shift from a state-oriented to a civil society-oriented institution, and as a result it disengaged from the authoritarian states of Latin America and embraced human rights as a basis for its actions. Subsequently modernized Catholicism has become a new transnational and de-territorialized global religion.

This transformation of Catholicism has had little impact on the Church's relationship to *laïcité*. The principal development has been the emergence of "*la nouvelle laïcité*" from 2003 onwards in which the state has extended its control of religion in public spaces by various legislative and judicial actions. The state no longer confines itself to the overview of religious symbols in schools, but claims jurisdiction over all public spaces including the street.¹⁷ However the state is primarily concerned, not with Catholicism which is no longer regarded as politically problematic, but with Islam. Churches are regarded as part of the national heritage from a tourist perspective. Chartres

¹⁶Casanova, "Public Religions Revisited," 106.

¹⁷Joan Wallach Scott, *The Politics of the Veil* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2007).

is a good example. The real target of *la nouvelle laïcité* is Islam and specifically the veiled Muslim woman.

Marxism and Islamofascism

To understand the critical reception of Foucault's journalistic commentary on the revolution, we need to understand both Marxism and Oriental Sciences. Foucault annoyed and irritated both Marxists and Oriental scholars. French academics had in fact been prominent in much early Orientalism and Islamic Studies in such figures as Jacques Berque, Louis Massignon, and Henry Corbin. Along with Claude Cahen, Rodinson was a member of the French Orientalist tradition that was influenced by Marxism and sociology. Rodinson had grown up in a Jewish household that was fervently anti-Israeli. His parents, who had escaped from earlier pogroms, died in Auschwitz in 1943. Rodinson, like many secular Jews, had joined the Communist Party in 1937, but turned against Communism in response to the autocracy of Stalinism. While rejecting Communism, his work was grounded in Marxist sociology. In his political career he published various works that were critical of Israel such as *Israel and the Arabs* (1982) and *Israel: A Colonial Settler State?* (1988). In the 1950s and 1960s, Marxism was "in the air" and Marxist categories were widely embraced by Arab intellectuals. However by the late 1970s, Rodinson lamented the decline of Marxist influence in the Middle East, noting that few regimes were committed to the struggle against the American hegemony and more broadly against the capitalist system. His *Islam and Capitalism* published in France in 1966 was the first publication to explore systematically the debate about the connections (if any) between Islam and capitalist development.

In my *Weber and Islam* I drew attention to the conundrum of secular sociology to make sense of the claims of charismatic prophecy and the extraordinary revelations of the Prophet.¹⁸ In 1961 in *Muhammad*, Rodinson, as an atheist, responded to the Prophet's revelation through a synthesis of Freudian psycho-analysis and Marxism to claim that

¹⁸Bryan S. Turner, *Weber and Islam: A Critical Study* (London: Routledge, 1974).

the Qur'an had emerged in the Prophet's unconscious and was forged from "his actual experience, the stuff of his thoughts, dreams and meditations, and memories of discussions that he heard."¹⁹ Perhaps not surprisingly the book was banned in many Muslim societies.

Rodinson dismissed the truth claims that orthodox Muslims make about the nature of their faith, the unique character of the Prophet, and their historical destination as a community of the faithful. What mattered for Rodinson was the role of Islam as a social movement alongside and comparable with twentieth-century Communism. However Marxism only takes us so far. The most important development of the historiography of Islam, according to Armando Salvatore, was undertaken by Marshall G. S. Hodgson whose three volume *The Venture of Islam*²⁰ remains the definitive social historical and sociological account of Islam from its origins until the twentieth century.²¹ Hodgson developed a theory of world history and analyzed Islamicate civilization as a world order. Whereas traditional Oriental studies had concentrated on the Arab world, Hodgson had an appreciation of Islam as a religious system connecting Europe, the Middle East and Asia into a global network. However Hodgson's main concern was to document how the core of religious consciousness, or "Sharia-minded" spirituality as he called it, was compromised by the power elite and their economic interests. The logic of Marxist sociology is either in general to ignore the religious mindedness of social actors, down-play the historical role of Sufism and Shi'ism, or to reduce religion to a thin ideological veneer covering and disguising real economic interests with (from a rational point of view) false beliefs.

Whereas Foucault saw the Shia Revolution as a spiritual movement, many in the West were quick to see it as fascism. Rodinson allegedly coined the term "Islamic fascism" to describe the Shi'ite revolution,

¹⁹Maxime Rodinson, *Muhammad, 2nd ed.* (London: Tauris Parker, 1971), 77.

²⁰Marshall G. S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*. 3 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974).

²¹Armando Salvatore, *The Sociology of Islam* (Oxford: Blackwell Wiley, 2016).

but there are however several other contending sources such as Michael Onfray who spoke of the Islamic revolution giving rise to “an authentic Muslim fascism” in his *Atheist Manifesto*²² and another being Malise Ruthven²³ in an article in *The Independent* newspaper where he used the term “Islamofascism”. The theme was also taken up by Paul Berman²⁴ and even more extensively by Norman Podhoretz in *World War IV: The Long Struggle Against Islamofascism*.²⁵

It was inevitable that Rodinson emerged as a major critic of Foucault. He complained that the “great gaps in his knowledge of Islamic history enabled him to transfer the events in Iran, to accept in most part the semitheoretical suggestions of his Iranian friends, and to extrapolate from this by imaging an end of history that would make up for disappointments in Europe and elsewhere.”²⁶ Rodinson opposed the idea of “political spirituality” that had allegedly inspired the revolutionary movement; it failed to uncover the more material causes behind the discontent. The intolerant nature of the religious elements in the revolt had from the beginning contradicted the humanist sense that he had ascribed to it. In so doing, Foucault had demonstrated his political naivety.

In Rodinson’s world view, political opposition came through working-class movements that found their expression in trade unions, socialist political parties, nationalist organizations, working-class communities and organizations promoting international associations and not through movements inspired by a millenarian religion. He claimed that, “Multiple cases of political spirituality have existed. All came to an end very quickly.”²⁷ Would this claim also apply to

²²Michael Onfray, *Atheist Manifesto: The Case Against Christianity, Judaism and Islam*, trans. Jeremy Leggatt (New York: Arcade Publishing, 2007), 204.

²³Malise Ruthven, “Construing Islam as a Language,” *The Independent*, 8 September 1990.

²⁴Paul Berman, *Liberalism and Terror* (N.Y.: W.W. Norton, 2003).

²⁵Norman Podhoretz, *World War IV: The Long Struggle Against Islamofascism* (New York: Doubleday, 2007).

²⁶Maxime Rodinson, “Critique of Foucault on Iran,” in *Khomeini and the Primacy of the Spiritual*, 267-277, trans. from Maxime Rodinson, *Le Nouvel Observateur*, 19 February 1979.

²⁷Rodinson, “Critique of Foucault on Iran,” 271.

the Pauline Christianity,²⁸ or to the Protestant Reformation, or to Pentecostalism in the twentieth century, or to Islam itself? Surely these movements would fall under the idea of “political spirituality.”

Modern social movements are perhaps best illustrated by Occupy Wall Street, Occupy Sandy, the Arab Spring, the Umbrella Revolution, the Jasmine Revolution and the 20 February Movement. These movements are often driven by educated, largely middle-class, young people who have little trust or interest in organized politics (of the left or the right) and they use social media rather than community groups and trade unions to mobilize their members. They draw heavily on women, women’s associations and gender politics. Women have played a conspicuous part in these new social movements as they did in the Shia Revolution. The distance between Rodinson and contemporary social theory is defined by these gender issues, recognition of women in social movements and the public, feminist social theory, and LGBT identity theory. Foucault by contrast was closely associated with new theories of sexuality.

Foucault’s Theory of Knowledge-Power

Foucault’s interpretation of the revolution was in many ways inconsistent with his earlier work on discipline and the more general theory of governmentality. For Foucault, power is not concentrated in any single institution such as the state. Rather it is dispersed to more local and micro levels such as the school room, the doctor’s clinic or the psychiatric couch.²⁹ He thus rejected the idea, common in Marxist sociology, that power rests in the centralized apparatus of the state. He saw power as distributed through social institutions, especially medicine and psychiatry.³⁰ The panopticon of Jeremy Bentham obviously fascinated Foucault as an early example of governmentality

²⁸Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: Foundation of Universalism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).

²⁹Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization* (London: Tavistock, 1971); see also Michel Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic* (London: Tavistock, 1973).

³⁰Michel Foucault, *Power: The Essential Works 3* (London, Allen Lane: The Penguin Press, 2001).

where a large number of prisoners could be disciplined by the architecture of observation. This example however points to an important difference between Foucault and his critics over the character of power. For Foucault, power is about producing effects – the disciplined self – whereas Marxism was about the negativity of power in creating repressive regimes, and thereby avoiding social effects.

In Foucault's account of subjectification, through socialization in the family and other primary institutions individuals acquire discipline that habituates them to society.³¹ As a result, individuals have a propensity to follow and obey the norms of society because social conformity is psychologically rewarded. For Foucault, habituation plays a large part in the exercise of power, and it is partly for that reason that we can include Foucault into a canon of political sociology – at least broadly defined. Foucault was concerned to study how power/knowledge/ethics were woven into the quest to support a political system that constrained any challenge to its legitimate authority.

In a series of lectures that were eventually published as *Security Population Territory* he explored the growth of the Christian pastorate as an example of governmentality growing out of religious practices towards the laity.³² This form of power was absent in Greek society, but generally manifest in the Eastern Mediterranean and especially among the Hebrews. Pastoral power was derived from the idea of a shepherd's responsibility for his flock. It was not a power over territory but over a population and it was a beneficent power, directed at the well-being of the flock. In Christianity this art of governing men signals the beginning of the modern state. Governmentality is par excellence the rational and calculated practice of regulation, but it is productive (of subjectivities) not necessarily destructive. Thus the soft power of the pastoral regime did not disappear with secu-

³¹Michel Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the Collège de France 1981-1982* (New York: Picador, 2005); see also Michel Foucault, *The Government of the Self and Others: Lectures at the Collège de France 1982-1983* (New York: Palgrave, 2011).

³²Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France 1977-1978* (New York: Palgrave, 2007).

larization. Instead it was built into the bureaucratic apparatus of the modern state.

Given Foucault's views on governmentality and pastoral power, how was the Shia Revolution possible? In fact how is any revolt possible? Why therefore did the prospect of revolutionary change interest Foucault sufficiently to bring him to Iran? The most plausible account of Foucault's vision of the revolutionary as a break with history is to be found in Behrooz Ghamari-Tabrizi's *Foucault in Iran: Islamic Revolution after the Enlightenment*. The subtitle is a particularly important aspect of his general argument. Foucault did not want to deny the unique possibility of historical change and the prospect of a breakthrough the routines of subordination, and he attempted to go outside the dominant paradigm of Western secularism to watch history in the making.

A charismatic breakthrough is not unthinkable in modernity, but do revolutions ultimately fail? Ghamari-Tabrizi locates this question in the context of the pessimism of the Left when, after the 1968 student revolt, there was an atmosphere of political defeatism in France. He writes: "Foucault saw in Iran a moment of creative pause in, or even negation of, his theory of power and governmentality. The Iranian masses demonstrated the possibility of resistance without participating in or perpetuating a *preconceived* schema of power."³³ Foucault did not recant his views because he did not want to rob the Iranian masses of the authenticity of their protest and their success in removing the Shah. Foucault's interpretation of the events that produced the revolution are not especially problematic once one accepts the notion *contra* Marxism that religion has independent effects and has a material force. In defence of Foucault, he did not wish to see the revolution through the framework of Western Orientalism. Published at the time of the revolution, Edward Said's *Orientalism* identified several defining themes in the Western view of Islam and Islamicate

³³Behrooz Ghamari-Tabrizi, *Foucault in Iran: Islamic Revolution After the Enlightenment* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2016), 68.

cultures. Islamic societies were static and unchanging, and hence in need of modernization which could only come through external forces.³⁴ Secondly, Muslim societies were backward and could not understand the real causes of their lack of history and their backwardness. Only the West could truly understand the East. While Said's criticism was largely addressed to literary works such as the novels of Jane Austin, there was ironically a parallel criticism of Marxism which in terms of the Asiatic mode of production which argued that radical social change could only come from outside the system.³⁵ Foucault to his credit was able to approach the Shia Revolution without the intellectual baggage of secular Marxism.

Conclusion: Foucault and the Fate of Revolutions

Foucault's newspaper articles have been translated and much discussed. It is not my intention here to repeat these commentaries. Foucault has been much ridiculed and criticized for his support of religion and the revolutionary overthrow of the Shah. Foucault did not retract from his original position and evolution of the revolution into an Islamofascist state.³⁶ These criticisms have, I suggest, more to do with French *laïcité* than with Foucault's support for a spiritual revolution in spiritless times. The criticisms and ridicule of Foucault emerged from a culture that could not recognise the political significance of global religions. He has also been criticized for his silence with respect to the role of Muslim women in the revolution and its aftermath. These attitudes are also part of the legacy of *laïcité*. Whereas the modern secular French woman is free to enjoy and express her sexual freedom, the Muslim woman is covered, secluded and lacking in will. The veil which is an offence to the Republic "covers what *ought* to be seen."³⁷

³⁴Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978).

³⁵Bryan S. Turner, *Marx and the End of Orientalism* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1978).

³⁶Janet Afary and Kevin Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution: Gender and the Seductions of Islamism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

³⁷Joan Wallach Scott, "Secularism, Gender Inequality, and the French State," in *Islam, Gender, and Democracy in Comparative Perspective*, ed. Jocelyne Cesari and José Casanova (Oxford:

The Shia Revolution can be said to have been successful in removing an authoritarian and repressive regime, but in the long run it failed to reconcile two contradictory principles – *velayat- e faqih* or the Rule of the Jurist and the democratic will of the masses invested in responsible institutions by fair elections. The *velayat- e faqih* was an invention of the Revolution and has no precedent in Shia theology in which the just Ruler is the Prophet and the twelve Infallible Imams.³⁸ The constitution named Ayatollah Khomeini as Leader for life and created an elected Assembly of Experts that in practice has merely endorsed the rulings of the Leader. Consequently the “monarchy was replaced by an Islamic Republic, a novel combination of clerical theocracy and populist democracy.”³⁹ In many ways the most negative outcome of the revolution was the reversal of the liberation of family law in 1979 that had been passed during the Shah’s reign. Under the government of Ahmadinejad the Revolutionary Guards became ever more powerful.

It is on these grounds that Foucault was criticized for naivety in his notion of “political spirituality” and for his failure to retract his views. However, as I have indicated, this judgment raises a more general question as to whether revolts and revolutions are ever successful, and hence whether opposition to authoritarianism is justified. Criticism of Foucault raises a far deeper problem in political philosophy about the unintended consequences of action. Modern Western thought does appear to embrace a metaphysical pathos of despair in promoting the view that the unintended consequences of political action are always negative. In this pathos, revolutions have outcomes that are the opposite of the the intentions of social actors. This promotes the obvious question: why are there no good unintended consequences? Fortune (*Fortuna*) looks unfavourably at protest.

Oxford University Press, 2017) 63-81.

³⁸Said Amir Arjomand, *The Turban and the Crown: The Islamic Revolution in Iran* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988.

³⁹Ziba Mir-Hosseini, “Islam, Gender and Democracy in Iran,” in *Islam, Gender, and Democracy in Comparative Perspective*, ed. Jocelyne Cesari and José Casanova (Oxford: Oxford University Press,) 211-236.

Defeatism was in the air in the late 1960s.⁴⁰ Was the French Revolution itself another failed revolution in which the aspirations of 1789 descended into the violence of 1793? The student revolts of the late 1960s had also been of little lasting consequence. By contrast, the religious protests of 1978-9 had removed the Shah through a mass movement. Similar arguments might be raised against those who welcomed the Arab Spring and endorsed the overthrow of Mubarak in Egypt. To question Foucault's endorsement of the Shia Revolution is therefore to question any mass movement against oppression and to resign oneself to the futility of protest.

⁴⁰Ghamari-Tabrizi, *Foucault in Iran*, 68.